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Editorial

Fuel inefficiencies

Bush 'reforms' would stall major improvements

The Bush administration apparently has hired someone with the late Rube Goldberg's special talents to serve as its energy consultant.

Goldberg, a popular cartoonist back in the era of the Model T, was known for drawing overly complicated machines that produced rather unimpressive results.

But at least his contraptions worked. The same can't be said for President Bush's proposal to "reform" fuel-economy standards for passenger vehicles.

Under current standards, automakers must meet at an average of 27.5 miles per gallon for cars sold in the United States. The figure hasn't changed since 1990.

After ignoring calls to raise the average the past six years, Bush is showing enormous interest in the subject -- thanks to public outrage over rising gas prices.

But, instead of embracing a long-stalled proposal in Congress that would boost the average to 33 mpg by 2011, the Bush administration wants to create varying standards based on the size of automobiles.

A similar system is in place for the misnamed "light truck" category, which includes gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicles, heavy pickups and even Hummers but exempts many of them from meeting the average.

The administration recently reduced those exemptions and called for increasing the light-truck average from today's 21.6 mpg to a new standard of 24 mpg by 2011.

The public can expect results just as modest, or worse, from the fuel-economy contraption now under construction for passenger vehicles.

Under the administration's proposal, car manufacturers that don't meet the average would be able to buy "credits" from companies successful in building fuel-efficient cars, such as Honda and Toyota.

Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., says the plan is "a back-door attempt to stall on real increases in fuel economy standards."

Those views are echoed by Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., co-sponsor of a bill that would raise the average for passenger cars to 33 mpg by 2011.

"We don't have to launch some massive new research program to discover how we can make vehicles more fuel-efficient," Boehlert told Grist, an environmental magazine. "We already know how. It's gonna cost a few bucks, but at \$3 a gallon for gasoline, the payback period is short order."

Congress should insist on something better than Bush's fuel-economy "reform." His contraption should go straight from the assembly line to the junkyard.